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## The Fantastic Variations of Neil Gaiman's *American Gods*

**ABSTRACT:** With the characteristics typical of postmodernist fiction, the novels written by Neil Gaiman, a British author of the imaginary, represent a contemporary perception of the imaginative literatures, regarded through the prism of hybridization. In consequence, in Gaiman's work, different poetics and conventions, such as the fantastic and the marvelous, are combined to reveal various depictions of the supernatural. As a result, in order to examine the author's style, it is necessary to ponder on the influence of the postmodernist on the choice of the genre. Furthermore, the analysis of the most important manifestations of the supernatural in Gaiman's astounding novel *American Gods* (2001) should be preceded by a short introduction to the understanding of the terms "the fantastic" and "the marvelous."

**KEY WORDS:** Neil Gaiman, *American Gods*, the fantastic, the marvelous, the supernatural, fantasy, postmodernism

Since an attempt to define or classify imaginative literatures, with numerous ramifications and categories within the implicated genres as well as the multiplicity of threads, perspectives, and references, remains a cumbersome task to complete, it should also be arduous to describe and examine the works of an author whose originality and tendency to combine, hybridize, and blur prevents any unequivocal categorization of his literary creation. And indeed, Neil Gaiman's prose has never been unambiguously labeled as the uncanny or the supernatural, which earned him various titles, one of them being the representative of dark or urban fantasy, who remains, however, incomparable to other authors,

such as Brandon Sanderson or George R.R. Martin. Gaiman has been juggling different poetics and genre tropes in the service of the story, thus acknowledging the vastness of the imaginative literatures and the closeness of each neighboring genre. In the context of the narrative structure, the fluctuation of styles and conventions, as well as the blurring of the boundaries, settle themselves in the writer's body of work as one of the major themes to be investigated. Furthermore, the specifics of Gaiman's prose in the aspect of blending various poetics, such as fantasy, horror, or fairy tale, and transcending their limits, position his writings in the area of postmodernist fiction, where literature should become a vehicle for the embracement of the recognized means and the search for new perspectives. As a result, the plenitude of the author's approaches towards the imaginative and contemporary literature in general provokes questions about the ways of employing the optics of the fantastic and the marvelous in Gaiman's prose as well as the related interplay of kindred genres.

The intricacies of the writer's body of work could be identified as a resonance of the stylistics of postmodernist fiction. Linda Hutcheon (1988) attempted to pinpoint the characteristics of this particular current in literature, art, and philosophy by indicating the direction which postmodernist novel had taken and succeeded in determining its general traits, that is, plurality, modification, or processing of traditional conventions and an ironic dialogue with the past. In the given context, one of the most important characteristics in the effort of outlining postmodernist elements in Gaiman's fiction will be the fluidity of boundaries between genres and styles with the absence of "unproblematic merging" (Hutcheon 1988: 9). Additionally, if one adopts Hutcheon's perspective, it is immediately visible that Gaiman's work is diverse and multifaceted at the level of various media and forms chosen as a vehicle for his narratives, for example, comic books, represented by the celebrated Sandman series (1989–1996), TV series screenplays, as in later novelized *Neverwhere* (1996), or numerous novels and short stories. The postmodernist quality of Gaiman's literary creation evinces itself in the author's penchant for revisiting the literary, cultural, and mythological themes, as in *Coraline* (2003), where the classical fairy tale motifs are modified to resemble a dark grotesque fantasy story, or in *American Gods* (2001), an

original reinterpretation of the melting pot of beliefs created unwittingly by the immigrants arriving in the USA. Moreover, the writer's latest book, *Norse Mythology* (2017), constitutes an example of the retelling of Scandinavian legends, from which Gaiman has drawn more than once. From postmodernism also stem Gaiman's readiness to allude to other authors, such as Rudyard Kipling in *The Graveyard Book* (2008), and his propensity to oscillate between what is real and what is imaginary. By departing from the traditional understanding of time and space in history and simultaneously deriving from the past, he imbues his prose with paradoxes and subjectivity. Nevertheless, the crucial postmodernist trait for the description of Gaiman's work is multiplicity of conventions and genres, reviewed and reformed to fit the context of the stylistics plethora. As a result, in Gaiman's prose, the fantastic entwines with the marvelous whereas the supernatural interlaces with dark or urban fantasy. The eerie atmosphere of the writer's narratives confuses those who would attempt to embrace the astonishing variability of his prose.

In order to ponder on the nature of Gaiman's literature of unpredictability and the manner in which the author finds the balance between the styles and genres, it is essential to locate his work within the framework of the classification of imaginative literatures. In other words, the understanding of the amalgamation of different shades of the related conventions requires a closer inspection of the prevailing poetics, with the focus on Gaiman's approach towards them. In the explanation of the essence of the fantastic, the research conducted by Tzvetan Todorov (1970) – a specialist in the field, who alludes to the remarks made by other theoreticians, for example, Louis Vax or Roger Caillois – concentrates on the intrusion of the inexplicable, the mysterious, and the impossible. However, in Todorov's optics (1970: 37–38), the core characteristic of the fantastic remains preeminently the hesitation of the reader and the protagonist, resulting from the inability to decide whether the unfolding events could be interpreted as real, even if unusual or bizarre, or as supernatural and magical, which disqualifies an allegorical reading of the text. To anchor the narrative in a very precise location in the landscape of imaginative literatures, in the area between neighboring genres, is also typical of Gaiman's texts, notwithstanding different reasons for such an attitude towards literature. Todorov stresses the fact

that the fantastic is produced exclusively in the indicated space because any shifts or modifications would imply the gravitating of the narrative towards another genre, such as the marvelous or the weird, whereas Gaiman's focus on the particular poetics seems temporary and transitory, which allows him to maintain the state of hesitation in readers who may not be capable of concluding which category Gaiman's prose should be assigned to.

Nonetheless, as a minor shift from the area indicated in Todorov's classification towards a slightly different perspective involves a trespass into other territories, Gaiman's change of tone would equally introduce a taste of a different convention, for example, the marvelous or urban fantasy. Following Todorov's (1970: 46) remarks, the marvelous should be perceived as the state in the narrative where the condition of hesitation disappears in favor of the imaginary and, hence, as the emphasis on the suspension of the known natural laws yielding to new mechanisms which appear as an indispensable addition to the literary universe if the protagonists wish to explain the bewildering circumstances in which they found themselves entangled. Provided that the story tips the balance in the other direction, it proves to be explicable in accordance with the approved understanding of reality and should be viewed as an example of the weird (Todorov 1970: 46). The notion of the supernatural explained or the supernatural accepted, which clearly roots the concept of the fantastic in the territory of indecision, is not unfamiliar to Gaiman, except that the writer moves between the conventions effortlessly in the framework of one novel or is unfaithful to one poetics in his different narratives – regarded separately or, to the contrary, as one Frankenstein-like creature of fluid boundaries. The use of the fantastic and the marvelous should be visible in the analysis of a concrete novel, namely *American Gods* (2001), a literary spectacle that mingles the fantastic with urban fantasy and the weird by delineating a path of transition between the styles.

The action of the author's magnum opus, *American Gods*, takes place in the contemporary western setting and revolves around the American national identity, erected upon the diversified cultural narratives from different corners of the world, incorporated into the pluralistic society of the USA by the incoming waves of immigrants. The ordinary is, however, disturbed by the manifestation of mythologies and beliefs embodied by

gods originating from various cultures. The protagonist, Shadow, leaves prison only to learn that his adulterous wife died in a car accident, along with her husband's best friend and employer. Shadow, feeling betrayed and confused, lacks purpose in life after the terrible loss he must suffer, which is used as an opportunity by Mr. Wednesday, a mysterious man who accosts the protagonist in order to persuade him into accepting the job of the eccentric's bodyguard. At the beginning, the story positions itself in the area of a realistic depiction of the character's stay in prison, where probability is never undermined. Shadow's predictions of misfortunes looming on the horizon of the near future introduce a certain flair of the weird into the narrative, as does the initial interval in the tale devoted to the description of an encounter with a prostitute, who symbolizes goddess Bilquis devouring her worshipper in the lovemaking act. Nevertheless, the scene could be understood both as the weird, if the reader resolves that the interpretation of the passage should be allegorical and, as a result, that it has not violated any established natural laws, or as the fantastic, if the reader recognizes the presented events as an excerpt importing into the text the elements of hesitation, which bid the reader to doubt whether the unsettling scene of the amorous ritual should be regarded as literal or metaphorical. By taking into consideration the perspective of the involved characters, perhaps the latter ought to be regarded as the more credible interpretation. The author hints at this particular reading by presenting the thoughts of the prostitute's client: "He thinks [...] whether what he sees is some kind of illusion. This is what he sees: he is inside her to the chest" (Gaiman 2001: 30). The unusual encounter definitely displays traits of the impossible, but could also be categorized as the aftermath of the postcoital bliss of the senses, deceived by the surge of lust.

The amount of the fantastic accumulates throughout the novel to the extent of implementing a marvelous discourse in the narrative, where the supernatural is finally acknowledged and approached as new, natural, and evident circumstances to which the protagonist and the majority of the American population were blind. As Katarzyna Gadomska (2002: 12–13) underlines in her comparison of the marvelous, science-fiction, and fantasy, the accepted supernatural is a distinguishing feature of the marvelous, constituting the common environment for the characters

inhabiting a world conditioned by the laws which simply differ from what the reader is familiar with in their experience. Appropriating this particular mindset in the context of *American Gods*, the transition from the fantastic towards the marvelous seems conspicuous, regardless of the author's tendency to mingle miscellaneous poetics and to evade an unambiguous ascription to one or the other imaginative literature. First, the climate of indecision lingers when Shadow crosses paths with his late wife, Laura. However, the unexpected reunion with the deceased happens at night, which encourages the protagonist to perceive the confrontation as a trick the mourning-induced despair has played on his tired mind. On the one hand, Shadow trusts his senses and understands that what he sees cannot be explained with the help of the empirical experience of the world. On the other hand, the feelings of the protagonist, such as love and disappointment, obscure his reasoning, prompting him to believe that Laura's sudden resurrection could be elucidated in a logical manner, which is visible in various passages from the text, for example: "The fluorescent light in the hallway was not kind: beneath it, Laura looked dead, but then, it did that to everyone" (Gaiman 2001: 64). Clearly, the rationalization of emotions finds its reflection in the character's fantastic-like hesitation, his internal tear between the explicable and the extraordinary.

The fantastic continues, even if at the same time the atmosphere of indecision recedes, mainly in order to induce Shadow into the embracement of the mechanisms of the supernatural, which imposed themselves on the character, and to urge him to welcome the revealment of his true identity in the act of self-acceptance. By camouflaging itself as a sophisticated retelling of mythologies in the guise of a contemporary urban fantasy, the novel guides the protagonist through the process of establishing his worldview in a policized attempt to rewrite a *bildungsroman* which "typically follows the growth of a child into a man ready to assume his proper place in society" (Lee 2016: 554). In the case of Shadow, the growth remains psychological and metaphorical, with other works of Gaiman, for example *Coraline*, being exemplifications of an inverted coming-of-age stories (Lee 2016: 553). The protagonist's evolution appears to be both an illustration of the gradual progress in the comprehension of the self and a reflection of the development of the author's



predilection for a particular model of presenting the transformation of the weird into the fantastic and, eventually, into the marvelous, viewed in contemporary texts as the core of what is popularly called fantasy (Gadomska 2002: 21).

The absence of certitude manifests itself in dreams the protagonist regularly experiences. Since Shadow's perception of the milieu in which he functions remains tainted by the ignorance of the company of legendary gods from diverse religions and cultures, the only channel through which he could be reached is dreaming. The acknowledgement of Mr. Wednesday being in truth mighty Odin, the superior deity in the Norse mythology, would emphatically expose the supernatural side of the events. The imposition of the presence of gods, descended from the pantheon of human beliefs and embodied by average people, unmasks the evidently incredible structure of the narrative. A pivotal moment of realization for Shadow, also central to the progressive shift between the fantastic and the marvelous, is the gathering of gods in Odin's attempt to unite them against the new deities of media and technology. Nevertheless, Shadow's senses, accustomed to recognizing only the familiar and to filtering the surrounding information, which naturally aids in rationalizing what may be overwhelming to the reason, remain disoriented. The protagonist's confusion does not facilitate the transition from the state of indecision towards the certainty of the existence of other, marvelous, mechanisms of reality. The meeting with the divinities is the first moment when they are directly revealed both to the protagonist and the reader: "Then the lights went out, and Shadow saw the gods" (Gaiman 2001: 129). However, the man has difficulties in comprehending the astounding ideas attacking his consciousness: "The images that reached his mind made no sense: it was like seeing the world through the multifaceted jeweled eyes of a dragonfly, but each facet saw something completely different, and he was unable to combine the things he was seeing" (Gaiman 2001: 131).

Since the knowledge of the existence of the gods is offered to Shadow but still eludes him, he exposes himself to the divine activity during sleep. The oneiric context for the marvelous encounters permits to maintain the blissful hesitation regarding the probability of the unfolding events, thus opening doors to the fantastic, notwithstanding the di-



rect display of the magical phenomena and creatures absent from the real world. Therefore, the perspectives of the reader and the protagonist diverge, for the former understands the intrusion of fantasy into the life of the latter, who refuses to acknowledge it and denies the possibility of the extraordinary being able to develop in its own right and means. Hence, Shadow experiences the incomprehensible via dreams. For instance, the protagonist makes love to Bastet, the Egyptian goddess of joy and fertility, who normally appears to the hero in the form of a cat. On multiple occasions, he confronts a buffalo-headed man who offers him enigmatic explanations: "A fly settled on the furry forehead. The buffalo man flicked it away. 'Ask.'" Thus, Shadow is prompted to express the confusing doubts depriving him of self-confidence and stability: "Is this true? Are these people really gods? It's all so..." He paused. Then he said, 'impossible'" (Gaiman 2001: 163). Apparently, the dreaming sequences favor the indecision encouraged by the fantastic, which, in consequence, appears to become a shelter to the common sense-challenging phenomena, with the marvelous symbolizing the other that requires confrontation and a more astute examination.

However, regardless of Shadow's sluggishness in accepting new and marvelous laws of nature, the author directs the story towards urban fantasy, a variation of fantasy understood as a reflection of the marvelous, which fits perfectly Gaiman's stance on the fantastic. As Jessica Tiffin (2008: 33) remarks, urban space is a "multivalent ground," where hybridity thrives and where an author of Gaiman's preferences should find a territory for the growth of multilayered and multidimensional concepts of the imaginary. By describing another urban fantasy tale written by Gaiman, *Neverwhere*, Tiffin (2008: 40) alludes to the final realization of the novel's protagonist, Richard, who ultimately grasps the meaning of the other. Through the mythologized USA, the *American Gods* hero's odyssey also ends in the embracement of the marvelous, which allows Shadow to finally discover peace of mind. The marvelous, or the state in which fantasy creates a natural environment for the protagonist, acquires a metaphorical meaning, whereas the crossing between the fantastic and the marvelous parallels the symbolic journey of the novel's hero, an embodiment of the perception of imaginative literatures in Gaiman's work.

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